MIDWIFE CRISIS
Exodus 1:7-21
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Facing a crisis is never easy. Facing a crisis in which we know our response will go against the powers that be can be deeply frightening. Such fear in the face of authority surfaces at an early age. Suddenly the parents we have admired and thought to be all knowing are seen as "off base" and possibly "dead wrong". Such crises with authority do not go away. In our country we have experienced a great many personal and corporate crises: The Anti-Slavery Movement, Labor Reform, The Civil Rights Movement, Woman's Suffrage, the Vietnam War, the rally for the Equal Rights Amendment. In these large issues, and scores of smaller ones, people have felt the pains of bondage, have questioned the established way of doing things and have moved to change the existing structure.

Harvard Psychiatrist Robert Coles has written, "In this life, we prepare for moments and events and situations that we never actually know about until they are upon us. We worry about wrongs, think about injustices, then all of a sudden the issue is not whether we agree with what we have heard and read and studied and talked about with friends. Rather, the issue is us."

In recent church history - women - the issue has been us. The arguments against the ordination of women have ranged from the Biblical fact that Jesus Christ was a male and therefore ministry in His name could only be carried out by men, to the argument that a woman's voice isn't deep enough to command pulpit attention. The arguments against women as clergy continue heatedly in the Roman Catholic Church, where Bishops admit tradition is the only reason for the denial, to our own church in which our newly elected moderator Robert Davidson lamented recently at a conference in Syracuse that no woman holds the position of Senior Pastor in our denomination, and 1200 churches do not think they have women in their congregations capable of serving as elders.

The crisis between the struggle for freedom and the bonds of the powers of the world continues...and yet today, we celebrate our denomination's decision to ordain women elders and clergy. We celebrate that new life is in the church...that stereotyped roles are being broken...that the process is birth.

Anyone who has been present for the birth of a child knows the power of the event. After waiting month after month, slowly and carefully preparing and planning, the actual arrival of new life bursts upon us unexpectedly. The birth event is absorbing and it commands the total attention of those present. Anyone who has been in a delivery room knows life calls us to attention, it will not go away. We could not turn back if we wanted to; the force of life will not be contained. The incredible miracle is realized and one new precious human life is brought into the world.

This was so in our story from Exodus. For two women, midwives by occupation, who had certainly delivered scores of new babies, the wonder of birth had not left them. The Israelite people were in bondage in Egypt, but the story tells us that even in their oppression, they multiplied and increased greatly. It appeared that no powers could hold back the boundless life which God had called into being.

No power except a summons from the royal chambers...the King of Egypt. Now the midwives were not a prestigious group. When called by the King, they were aware from the start that they weren't being invited for a casual chat, or tea in the Rose Garden. We can imagine their fear as they approached the palace...two poor foreign women...their knees buckled and their stomachs turned inside out.

Then the decree from on high, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him." The order from Pharaoh was to kill. The midwives' feelings intensified. Their instincts must have said that they should follow this order for safety sake. To disobey a direct command from the King was most dangerous. They were nobodies in the face of great power. Their call had been to enable birth, to assist in the bringing forth of new life. Now they were being told to violate this call...to seek death rather than life. A midwife crisis, so to speak.

The story tells us the midwives feared God and did not do as the King ordered. Instead, they took the next perfect baby boy and placed him in his mother's arms.

This action might have been their last...their last duty as midwives. Death could have resulted as the King learned of their disobedience. But the force of bringing life into the world was greater than the fear of the King. The midwives feared God, and placed the crisis in God's care.

The apostle Paul wrote centuries later, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not creation alone which groans, but we ourselves." Paul speaks of moments of birth; some are physical, more are social, political, communal births. The sons and daughters of God coming into life again and again.

The two Hebrew midwives are but brief brush strokes in the Biblical story, but without them our story might not have been told. For the most part this episode has been lost from our study of the Bible. No one remembers the midwives at all. It is much like our study of history in which the accomplishments of women, blacks and minorities have often been left out. Yet the midwives are important people to God. They even have names, Shiphrah and Puah. And without them Moses would not have lived. Without them the exodus from bondage would not have happened. These two uneducated and lowly women saved the Hebrew people. Two women, together in crisis, strengthening one another...little known and powerless in the eyes of the world...were called to assist in the birth of the new age. The miracle of the story is that the midwives feared God...Pharaoh had not reckoned with such a possibility. The resources of the two women outdid the crass power of the tyrant.

Women today remain a part of the powerlessness of the world. The guest list to Anwar Sadat's funeral is a visible witness to who are considered the pharaohs in this world; no women were noticeably absent. Yet women today sit where those two Hebrew midwives sat...sit in the crisis of choosing to trust their inner direction or bow in fear to the world's oppressors. Into the land of plenty God has cast a [illegible]. Like the little known, yet essential characters to the Hebrew story, Shiphrah and Puah, women continue to be called as agents for new life.

Midwives who remind us not to underestimate the power of the least. Midwives who remind us that title and position do not mean ministry. The story gives me a vision of women throughout time, women of all ages and colors and nationalities. Forgotten, faceless and often nemeless midwives who have encouraged and enabled new life.

I see Biblical women like Ruth and Naomi. Ruth, married to Boaz, to them a child is born and given to Naomi, the grandmother. The story tells us "Naomi took

the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse." And that gives me a vision of a long progression of faceless people who enable humanity to come to life: baby-sitters, preschool teachers, nurses, grandmothers, aunts, foster parents, neighbors, who throughout time have taken children to their bosom, loved them, and made them their own. I see a picture of the strong Hebrew Judge, Deborah, and those women who through time have not worn judge's robes but who have been trying to mitigate, to settle disputes, paid and unpaid, in schools and in homes, working to bring people together.

I see Lydia, the first businesswoman. The disciple in Acts tells us, "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptised, with her household, she besaught us saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay!,"

This story helps me see the women throughout history who have said again and again, "Come stay with us"...Women missionaries in China, Korea, South Africa and around the world, who have opened their homes to strangers from time to time. The marchers during the Civil Rights protests in the sixties were pictured in newspapers and magazines. Yet I see the effort of hundreds of women in shanties along the way, opening their paper thin doors, saying, "Come in and stay with me, let me give you bread, let me wash your tired feet."

I see Miriam, sister of Moses, leading the Hebrew people across the Red Sea and she reminds me of pioneer women, heading west with few possessions but much faith, traveling month after month to forge a new life on this land. Pioneer women who with rags and handmade floss made quilts and embroidered designs to make their stark world more lovely, who while risking change linked the beauty of home to home.

I see Rachel, urn balanced high, coming to the well early in the morning and she brings images of all the market women in developing countries coming with weights so heavy on their heads...coming to market to supplement the meager family income. The vision of women around the world includes Asian women carrying sick children in their arms, walking day after day to reach a clinic called Hope to those dying.

I see thousands of washer women, taking the early bus to help begin someone else's day, the bundles of clothes, lysol burned hands, hardened knees, cleaning other folks' houses because for them there are no job options...but they have a dream in their hearts, a vision to make a better life for their children. They pay the fees for the bachelor degrees of their sons and daughters. Midwives, who hold their heads high because they fear God...and a new generation is being born.

The forgotten ministries of women throughout history continue. In recent times by women of advantage in a society rich by the standards of the world. Women with husbands and fathers to provide for them who have seen privilege is meaningless without responsibility. Women like Lucretia Mott, Quaker, wife, mother, radical reformer, anti-slavery leader and advocate of women's rights. Labeled the Black Man's Goddess for her pioneering role in the anti-slavery movement and labeled "Unsexed Woman" for her activism for women's rights. Her life was devoted to freeing persons from the chains of bondage by advocating legal change to enable full rights for all human beings.

Women like Elizabeth Blackwell...first woman doctor in America, a twentieth century midwife. She applied to twenty medical schools, was accepted at one with the stipulation she dress like a man. She refused. She finally achieved her goal but expressed her inner crisis in this way, "I understand now why this life has never been lived before. It is hard, with no support but God's purpose, to live against every species of social opposition."

And in 1980, midwife Sonia Johnson was excommunicated from the Mormon Church for working for the Equal Rights Amendment. The issue was not simply the ERA but that Sonia Johnson challenged the Mormon Church, secret lobbying against the ERA. She challenged the power of Pharaoh.

Today we continue to sit where the midwives sat. So as we are all ministers, we are all midwives with Christian responsibility in the world. Men and women wait in crisis. The metaphor of the midwife is for us all as partners in ministry. We are like midwives who call in question the status quo, the stereotypes, the prejudices that bind us all, who challenge the injustice of the powerful, the oppression of the poor, and who risk for new life in the church and in the world: people willing to take an unpopular stand, for ministers of Christ must follow the Cross.

"See what love has been given us that we should be called Children of God."

Let us celebrate today and thank God there are midwives among us.

Amen.